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ASSISI

THE SERAPHIC CITY



FLORENCE

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SIGISMONDO BENELLI

52 52 52 52 FLORENCE



PH ALINAPI

THE BASILICA of St. Francesco.

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" We are in the lower church of S. Francesco. High mass is being sung, with orchestra and organ and a choir of many voices. Candles are lighted on the altar, over-canopied with Giotto's allegories. From the low southern windows slants the sun, in narrow bands, upon the many-coloured gloom and embrowned glory of these painted aisles. - The whole low - vaulted building glows duskily; the frescoed roof, the stained windows, the figure - crowded pavements blending their rich but subdued colours, like hues upon some marvellous moth's wings, or like a deep - toned rainbow mist discerned in twilight dreams".

J. A. SYMONDS.



UNDER grey Etruscan Cortona, cresting its precipitous hills, sweeps the sluggish train which is bearing us from Arezzo to Assisi. As the sombre towers and massive walls of the solemn old city, illuminated by the level rays of the westering sun, fade from our view, we glide out upon the shallow shores of wide - stretching Lago Trasimeno, its picturesque islands apparently floating upon the mirror - like surface, which is unruffled by even the most fairy-like of zephyrs. The scene thus revealed in the

hushed quiet of the evening hour seems to breathe of an eternal peace and pastoral tranquillity. It is hard indeed to believe that upon these verdant smiling shores was fought one of the most bloody battles recorded in ancient history, when the mighty Hannibal smote the Roman army hip and thigh with a great slaughter, entirely wiping them off the face of that earth over which their serried cohorts had marched so proudly and fearlessly to an unexpected doom.

Presently we sweep by under lordly Perugia, gazing out serenely from her lofty eminence upon the rich Umbrian plains watered by the winding Tiber, beyond which, in the misty distance, are the far blue mountains, broken up here and there into the soaring peaks that frown down upon Siena, Orvieto, Chiusi and Monte Pulciano. In half-

an hour, historic Assisi bursts into view, enthroned upon her amphitheatre of hills and crowned with the antique crumbling castle which in mediæval days of incessant warfare bade defiance to the numerous enemies that encompassed her round about with intent to lay waste and destroy.

Close to the railway station at Assisi is the spacious and somewhat imposing domed church of S. Maria degli Angeli, which is built over the tiny chapel of the Portiuncula, bestowed upon S. Francis by the Benedictines of Monte Subasio; the arid-looking precipitous mountain to the eastward of Assisi, on the slopes of which once stood a mighty monastery of which not one stone is left upon another. Around the Portiuncula, in rude and comfortless huts, lived in those early days S. Francis and his de-

voted followers, and it was here that the worn - out and devoted saint breathed his last.... “ His face radiant with happiness, he kept asking his companions to recite the Canticle of the Sun, often joining in it himself, or breaking forth into his favourite psalm *Voce mea ad Dominum clamavi*. With these words of praise and gladness, the Blessed Francis of Assisi, the spouse of Poverty, died in a mud hut close to the shrine he loved, on the 3^d of October of 1226, in the forty - fifth year of his age. It was sunset, the hour when in Umbria, after the stillness of a warm autumn day an unusual tremor passes through the land, and all things in the valley and upon the hillsides are stirred by it, when a flight of larks circled above the roof of the hut where the saint lay at rest. And these

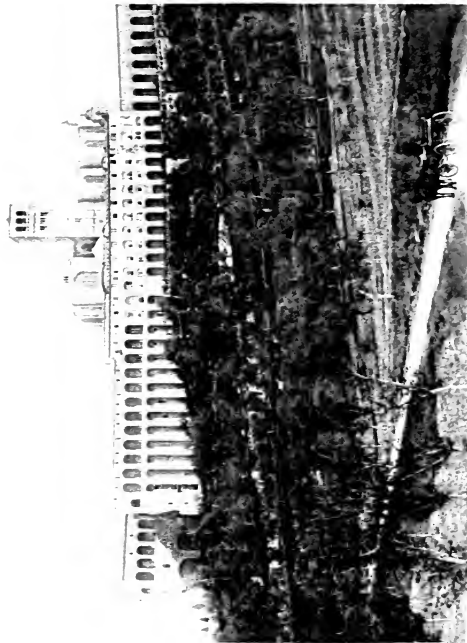
birds of light and gladness seemed by their sweet singing to be in company with Francis praising the Lord God " (1).

But we must not linger at the Portiuncula, as we shall return to it later on. The old-world city of Assisi calls to us to hasten to the shelter of her protecting walls and gateways away upon the steep hillside; for the sun has set behind the long range of violet mountains in the radiant West, and the shades of evening are beginning to fall - twilight being but of short duration in southern lands. Assisi is situated a mile and a half from the railway station, and although the road is good, the latter part of the way is steep and winding, as befits the approach

(1) "The story of Assisi" by Lina Duff Gordon. (Mrs Waterfield).

to a hill - city crowning many olive - clad almost precipitous heights.

As our willing little horse trots off along the dusty road fringed with mulberry and maple trees, our eyes, eagerly scanning the more prominent buildings of the still distant city, alight upon the massive time worn walls of the famous double-church of S. Francesco and its adjacent monastery. They are weirdly illuminated by the deep crimson and orange light of the Umbrian afterglow, against which the mountains stand out in clearly outlined masses of soft grey and violet. It is a mighty range of buildings, with a medley of arches, buttresses, loggias, and Gothic windows; a dominant square - built campanile being the most prominent feature of the actual church. Architectural beauty formed apparently no part of the



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THE CHURCHES and CONVENT of St. Francesco.

designer's scheme. He wished to astonish his contemporaries by building in memory of the holy S. Francis a massive almost awe-inspiring building which should dwarf every other church and monastery in the city. In this he was eminently successful, but it was not a lofty ideal, nor in keeping with the teaching of S. Francis, who was never weary of preaching the sanctity of poverty, and the holiness of self-renunciation.

The rooms we had engaged were in a house at the very summit of the town, and the panorama from its windows was one of the most ideal beauty and of vast extent, embracing the far-stretching well-tilled Umbrian plains, rich in silver olives, golden corn, and clustering vines; the serrated ranges of purple mountains, here and there clothed with patches of forest, or dotted

with picturesque white villages; and the dull gleam of tortuous streams gliding sluggishly seawards, like sleepy serpents, between shallow alluvial banks studded with lines of tall shivering poplars, and vine-festooned mulberry and maple trees.

Our first visit on the following morning was to the great church of S. Francesco, which certainly occupies a most magnificent site upon a lofty plateau of its own, on the northern side falling away in steep undulations to the River Tescio, clothed with a somewhat stunted but dense forest of ilex and chestnut.

But if the architecture of this colossal church - consecrated by Pope Innocent IV in 1253 - leaves much to be desired, the unique beauty of the interior makes ample amends, for in its gloomy semi-Byzantine

shades - we are speaking of the lower church - we find ourselves face-to-face with the mysterious beauty of the fresco-work of such masters of the brush as Cimabue, Giotto, Simone Martini, Pietro Lorenzetti, and Taddeo Gaddi. The first-named painter - the father of Italian art - has painted in the right transept a glorious fresco of the Madonna, the fame of which has spread throughout the Art World. "The great spirit of her presence", says Lina Duff Gordon, "fills the church, her majesty and nobility is that of the ideal Madonna, grave to sadness, thinking as her eyes look steadily out upon the world, what future years would bring to the Child, seated on her lap, who stretches out a baby hand to clasp her veil. All the angels round the throne sway towards her. In their heavy plaits of hair shines a dull

red light, and in their wings and on the Madonna's gown are mauve and russet shades like the colours of autumnal oaks".

But it is Cimabue's pupil, Giotto, who reigns supreme as a fresco-painter in this part of the basilica, and in the vaulting above the high-altar.

His work is that of an immortal genius, charged with power, and permeated with faith, about to show forth to the world what the dawning Spirit of the great Renaissance was capable of achieving in its loftiest ideals, and masterly knowledge of form and colour. One of Giotto's finest frescoes is close to Cimabue's Madonna, and represents "The Visitation", and near it is "The Nativity", both harmonious and graceful works, the glowing colours of which have of course faded with the dim shadowy centuries that

have glided away like veiled wraiths into the enveloping mists of time. Other works by this great master are the "Visit of the Magi", a sublime "Crucifixion" full of pathos and dignity; and various scenes taken from the life of the Virgin, such as the "Flight into Egypt", the "Return of the Holy Family from Egypt", and the "Preaching of the young Christ in the Temple". Some of this work, however, is attributed to Taddeo Gaddi.

There is also in this right transept a fresco interesting to Florentines, as it represents a miracle said to have been performed by S. Francis in the old gray city on Arno's banks. A child fell out of a window of what is now the massive weather-beaten Palazzo Feroni, in the Piazza S. Trinità, and was killed upon the spot; but the

Saint miraculously appeared as the body was being borne to the grave, and restored it to life, and to its parents' arms.

The little chapel of S. Nicholas at the extremity of the right transept is adorned by a charming series of frescoes depicting scenes in the life of that Saint by Giotto. Here also are the twelve Apostles, finely painted, by the same master. In the crypt, immediately beneath the high-altar, lies the sacred body of the founder of the Franciscan Rule.

In the vaulting over the high-altar, that Master Spirit Giotto is at his best, for here are his imposing grandly suggestive frescoes representing the three Counsels of Perfection - Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience. Here also is S. Francis in Glory, seated upon a throne, and o' er canopied by flights

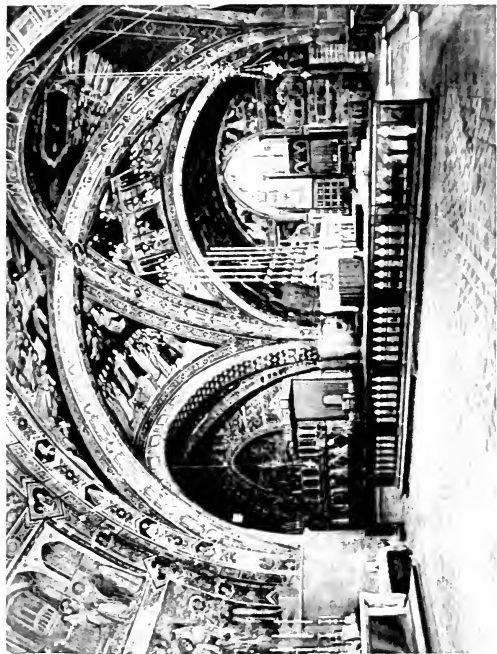
of quiring Angels appearing from the clouds.

The chapels on each side of the nave of the church are also full of frescoes of varying merit. The best, undoubtedly, are those that adorn "La cappella di S. Martino", for they are full of the exquisite charm, and the refined treatment for which the great Sienese artist, Simone Martini, was renowned. Mr Berenson, the well-known art-critic, says of this painter: "Simone was master of colour as few have been before him, or after him. He had a feeling for line always remarkable, and understood decorative effects as a great musician understands his instruments. Where shall we see colour more symphonic than in the single figures among his Assisi frescoes!...

"What charm of feeling in that exquisite

fresco at Assisi wherein we behold the young S. Martin receiving his knighthood! The Emperor girds his sword about the fair youth, a knight fastens his spurs, while many gay squires look on, and listen to the twanging and piping of the minstrels.... Simone is the most loveable of all the Italian artists before the Renaissance”..

The stained glass windows in this chapel are also very beautiful, rich but subdued and harmonious in colouring. Indeed the Basilica is well endowed with that rare deep-toned antique glass which one associates with Milton's dim religious light. In the left transept Pietro Lorenzetti has decorated the walls with frescoes, the most beautiful of which is the “Madonna with S. Francis and S. John” - a composition permeated with religious charm, and deep feeling. Near



PIA ALINAP.

Interior of the inferior Church of St. Francesco.

it is a large "Crucifixion" by the same painter, and a fresco representing S. Francis receiving the stigmata at La Verna.

From the left transept one passes through the sacristy door to the staircase leading to the upper Church. The lower part of the walls of the nave of this building are covered with Giotto's frescoes representing the life of S. Francis - twenty eight in number. Many of these interesting paintings are much injured by time and the restorer's hand.

Six hundred years have passed by since Giotto toiled at his prodigious task, his heart filled with love for his art, and an undying reverence for the Saint whose life of self-denial he was recording with his master-brush. So it is small wonder that this series of frescoes reveals the march of that callous unrelenting time that revels in the destruc-

tion of Art's beautiful creations. These frescoes, lovely and interesting as they are, cannot compare with the painter's later work in the Lower Church, or with his frescoes in S. Croce at Florence.

Mr Berenson considers that Giotto only painted the first nineteen of the series, and that the remainder were executed by one of his pupils; which is very probable indeed. The apse and transepts of this church were painted in fresco by Cimabue and others, but the colours are so ruined by damp, and vandalistic neglect that it is even difficult to distinguish the subjects. The stalls in the choir are beautiful beyond words to express, and were designed by Domenico da S. Severino in the year 1500; being executed in *intarsia* work inlaid in the most perfect manner, and representing in many

cases the figures of the early Franciscan brethren; the actual companions of the Seraph in his toilsome wanderings upon earth.

We were fortunate enough to be in Assisi the first week in October, when is celebrated in the Church of S. Francesco the anniversary of the death of S. Francis. On this occasion, for the first time, the gloomy vault-like basilica was beautifully illuminated by festoons of hanging coloured glass lamps, red, green, and yellow. The effect, with the crowds of picturesque worshippers beneath, and the sounds of solemn chanting from an unseen choir of monks, accompanied by the deep notes of the pealing organ, was most touching and impressive - a scene that can never pass from the memory as long as life endures.

S. Clare, the devoted friend and disciple

of S. Francis, was also a native of Assisi, and her embalmed body lies in a sanctified chapel in the crypt of the church which bears her name. This building stands at the eastern end of the Seraphic City, and has a very beautiful and graceful campanile of mellow stone. The interior of the church is very cold, colourless, and bare, although it contains a few interesting frescoes, notably a portrait of Santa Chiara, by an unknown painter, in the chapel of San Giorgio. About a mile from this church, and situated outside the Porta Nuova is the old grey weather-beaten convent of San Damiano, purchased of late years by the Marquess of Ripon. It was in this lonely sequestered spot that S. Clare passed the greater part of her holy self-sacrificing life. Nothing has been altered since those far away days in

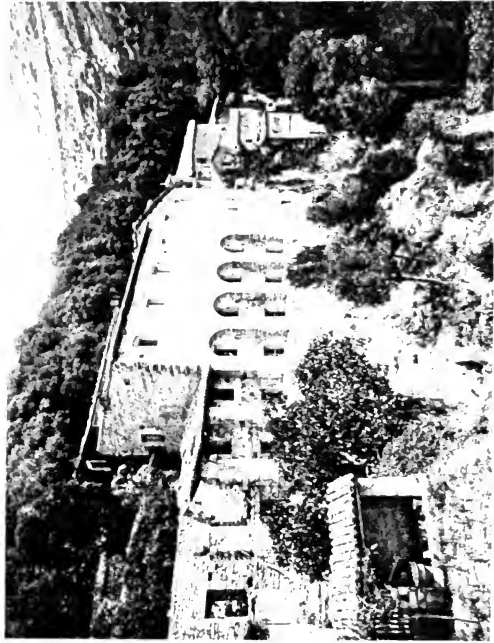
the 13th century. The tiny dark venerable church is full of antique relics and fadeless memories of the departed Saint. Her bedroom; her oratory; her tiny garden, still carefully tended; the refectory; all have escaped the restorers' hand, and bring back mediæval memories to the would-be re-builder of past ages. The birds flute and pipe from the ilex wood behind the ancient Convent walls, for here they can enjoy peace and safety from the prowling *cacciatore*, who with ludicrous self-assurance hugs himself with the idea that he is a sportsman because he sells sparrows and robins in the market for four *soldi* apiece. These feathered songsters are the descendants of the birds that doubtless Santa Chiara and her nuns - mindful of the precepts of S. Francis - protected, and fed on cold winter days when the snow

lay heavy upon the land, and the wind blew with bitter intensity from the steep white slopes of the surrounding hills. From the Saint's tiny garden the eye can roam over the rich Umbrian plain - even as hers roamed - and can distinguish the faraway towers and walls of Spello, Foligno, Spoleto, and Montefalco; each with its background of blue and purple hills, here and there fissured and seamed with deep shadowy ravines, or dark with uneven patches of forest, and clumps of umbrageous ilex or tall sentinel - like cypress. The rich vines in the teeming productive valley beneath have been just stripped of their last bunches of purple grapes, and along the white dusty poplar - shaded roads the heavy wains drawn by the patient dun oxen, are slowly creaking along, escorted by sunbrowned *contadini* and groups

of lip-stained *bambini* whose shrill unmelodious voices mingle with the cracking of whips, the barking of dogs, and the chime of village bells from scattered *campanili* - "over some wide - watered shore, swinging slow with sullen roar". The Marquess of Ripon has installed some Franciscan brothers in the Convent of S. Damiano, and very happy they look in their charming retreat, embosomed amongst the ilex and olive trees, and surrounded by deathless memories of the holy women who in the far-away centuries of constant warfare and tribulation here lived in contemplation and prayer, striving to lead the higher life by assisting the weak and suffering, and feeding the hungry.

The cathedral of Assisi is dedicated to S. Rufino, and is sometimes overlooked by hurried visitors, as it does not occupy a

central position, and is much hemmed in by other lofty buildings. It has a very fascinating brown - almost one may say sunburnt façade, decorated by Giovanni di Gubbio with quaint pillars and carved doorways, with a picturesque rose-window, processions of stone animals, and other grotesque devices. A very massive timeworn *campanile* keeps watch and ward over this ancient domed church, but it is badly cracked in many places, and can scarcely be very safe one would suppose. The interior of the church is sadly disappointing, for heavily indeed has the hand of the vandal been laid upon these ancient stones, as is too often the case in modern Italy. The pillars, for instance, are painted in imitation of marble, and there are several ignoble statues of prophets dotted about, which might well be



PH. ALINAH

« LE CARCERI » - View of the Convent.

consigned to the stone-breaker's yard. The ceilings are also appalling - there is no other word for them. The decorations of the altars and side-chapels are tawdry, and in the worst possible taste. In contrast to these, however, are two modern marble statues of S. Francis and S. Clare, the former by Signor Dupré - the famous sculptor - and the latter by his gifted daughter. Both were offerings to the church, gifts much appreciated by the Assisans.

The most interesting object in San Rufino is the antique font in which S. Francis and S. Clare, and many other noted persons were baptised. S. Francis very often preached in this church, for in his day it was a building of supreme importance, and of great sanctity. For several centuries now it has been eclipsed and overshadowed by

the great basilica of S. Francesco. The visitor to S. Rufino must not fail to see the noble triptych by Niccolò da Foligno which stands near the entrance to the choir. It is a fine painting of the Madonna and Child supported by four symbolical Saints, S. Peter Damian, S. Marcello, S. Rufino - a martyred Bishop of Assisi - and S. Esuberanzio. The predella of the triptych is exquisitely painted, and is worthy of the most careful study. The scenes represent the cruel martyrdom of S. Rufino, and the subjects are therefore not pleasant to contemplate, although the skill of this artist arouses our enthusiastic admiration. S. Rufino can also boast of some very fine carved stalls, elaborately inlaid with most lovely *intarsia* work.

One of the most charming and interesting walks in the neighbourhood of the Se-

raphic City is to the so-called *Carceri*, a collection of rock-caves in a deep shadowy ravine on the NW. slopes of Monte Subasio, and about 3 miles distant from the Porta Cappuccini. To these grottoes S. Francis and some of his more intimate followers used to retire periodically for contemplation and prayer; and in those days the spot must indeed have been a wild and desolate one hemmed in by huge rocks, savage - looking time - worn cliffs, and a few gnarled ilex and chestnut trees, but almost destitute of any other kind of vegetation, and the resort of wild animals, and fierce birds of prey. In this remote spot the Benedictines had built a tiny hermitage, and with their usual kindness and love for S. Francis handed it over to the Saint for his own private use. The spot now greets one almost as an oasis

in the desert meets the eye of the tired and thirsty Bedouin. The deep rocky ravine has been planted with dense ilex woods, where amid the sheltering undergrowth the wild flowers burst forth into bloom when the warm and ever welcome sun of April and May pours down through the leafy canopy overhead its rays of revivifying light and heat ; and the brown and green lizards emerge from their long winter hibernation, and with supreme happiness bask upon the mossy stones and weather-worn boulders ; whilst joyous birds hover in the radiant perfumed air, or warble love-songs amidst the branches of the freshly-budded leaves, and honey-sweet starry blossoms, which form their arboreal Paradise. In the midst of the wood stand a tiny monastery and church built over the Grotto Hermitage of S. Francis,

and inhabited by three Franciscan monks, one of whom, a man of venerable appearance, acted as our *Cicerone*, and guided us by shady tortuous paths to the outlying grottoes which are now half hidden in tangled masses of creepers and thick undergrowth, forming a luxuriant shelter for the wood violet, the sweet cyclamen, and the shy hepatica.

Our favourite walk in the neighbourhood of Assisi however, was to pass through the upper part of the City under the Castle hill, past picturesque bubbling fountains, shattered pillars, crumbling bas-reliefs, and quaint way-side shrines with their simple offerings of a tiny bunch of flowers, or sprig of myrtle or rosemary; to the half-ruinous Porta Perlici, and issuing thence to pass along the country road overhanging the pre-

cipice which fell away steeply to the bed of the river, for half a mile or so, and then turn off to the right by a mountain path which like a sinuous snake skirted the mighty base of boulder-strewn Monte Subasio. This path wound along in a northerly direction towards Nocera, and the far distant Apennine peaks. The air was always pure and bracing, and the scenery magnificent. Especially grand was the view looking back towards the City and the profound shadow-haunted Tescio valley, at the supremely beautiful, but evanescent hour of an Umbrian sunset, when in the soft shimmer of the golden twilight:

“The Western waves of ebbing day
Rolled o’er the glen their level way,
Each purple peak, each flinty spire
Was bathed in floods of living fire

But not a setting beam could glow
Within the dark ravine below
Where twined the path in shadow hid
Round many a rocky pyramid
Shooting abruptly from the dell
Its thunder – splintered pinnacle". (1)

The great Castle of Assisi, known as the *Recca Maggiore*, stands out grey and prominent against the crimson, orange, and yellow glow of the western heavens, its lofty hill dotted here and there with lines of sombre cypresses, and falling away beneath into a profound gulf of violet shadows, in the medley of which ruinous bridges and crumbling towers reveal gray masses of antique lizard-haunted stone-work, once proudly dominating the sluggish stream. On a rival

(1) "The Lady of the Lake".

hill, facing the majestic castle, stands the lesser fortress of *Rocca Minore*, its lofty time-worn keep still frowning and formidable, as if prepared to defend the Northern approach to the city. Between these two fortresses, but more distant, in a gap of the hills, appears the dome and square-built campanile of the cathedral, from which the solemn bells are ringing out the last chimes of the *Ave Maria*, mingling with numerous other brazen tongues from convent turret and church bell-towers scattered over the city, and studding the fruitful vales enshrouded in a diaphanous mist beyond the hoary old battlements. Far in the distance, and outlined darkly against the luminous glow of the ruby and topaz sky, the purple ranges of mountains reveal themselves in ethereal beauty, the evening star glowing with golden radiance from amid



P. H. ALINARI

PANORAMA with view of the Castle.

some umber cloudlets floating like fairy islands in an opalescent sea of waveless calm.

The stone of which the greater part of Assisi is built, is remarkable for its beautiful colours, and also for its capability of resisting the devastating influence of winters' storm and Time's decay. Almost of the consistency of marble, this ancient stone, quarried from time immemorial from the steep slopes of Monte Subasio, reveals delicate tints of pink, red, and gray-blue, - the most perfect building material conceivable.

The traveller who happens to feel in a poetic or contemplative mood at the hour of sunset, will do well to repair to the level acacia-planted road, which immediately outside the crumbling old Porta S. Giacomo, leads to the city's Campo-Santo, which occupies a little plateau of its own on the

north side of the city, overhanging the precipitous slopes which fling themselves over with stony cliff-like abruptness to the shadowy vale of the Tiber - seeking Tescio, whose banks are here almost hidden by soaring poplars, and a few scattered mill-houses embosomed in their groves of fig, olive, mulberry, and pear trees. The long battlemented walls of the *Rocca Maggiore* frown down upon the Campo-Santo from their lofty eminence to the south, but the most superb, even enthralling, scene, is that which meets ones' eye on gazing towards the glowing iridescent fires of the refulgent west, against which stand out in bold relief the imposing masses of the great Franciscan convent and church crowning the ilex-clothed promontory jutting out with such solemn grandeur, such fortress-like dominance, into the hushed

quietude of the vast plain stretching away beneath. The sun-browned hard-working *contadini* are now resting from their labours in the vinelands and the olive-orchards; and the great soft-eyed dun-coloured oxen, and the beautiful mealy-nosed donkeys are slumbering in their sheds, or munching their hardly-earned evening meal, forgetful for the nonce of the heavy yoke and the overladen pannier.

As a somewhat comical proof of how the memory of S. Francis still occupies a prominent place in the mind of the unlettered peasant of the Umbrian villages, we once saw a very handsome donkey, laden with panniers, deliberately lie down in the middle of the dusty road. He could not, of course, rise again until he was relieved of some of the weight he was carrying - which, by the

way was not by any means excessive. The lad who was in charge of the beast, was, as usual, a long way in the rear chattering volubly to some acquaintance he had met in the road—doubtless about some sum of money he had lately earned, or of the way his mother had prepared the *polenta* for breakfast that morning. The instant, however, that he caught sight of his donkey's misbehaviour, he came stalking up with swift strides, shouting in shrill reproachful tones: "S. Francis! how could you be so wicked, and lazy, and behave in such a disgraceful manner?" His deft fingers soon released one of the panniers, and the donkey, with a penitent air, staggered to its feet, and after a preposterous series of hee-haws, prepared to resume its journey: the echo of the Saint's all-compelling name still ringing in his long

furry ears. The lad did not attempt to use the long stick he carried. He simply hurled the Saint's name at the malcontent, feeling sure that the beast would immediately resume its duties!

In the Piazza Grande is the lovely portico of the Temple of Minerva, one of the most interesting Roman remains in Italy. The graceful fluted pillars of its portico are stained a deep brown, and are palpably mouldering with extreme old age, but it is earnestly to be hoped that this relic of the classic Augustan age will still exist for many a year to gladden the heart of the antiquary and the artist. This portico was so admired by the German poet Goethe, that it is said that he refused to visit any of the other remarkable buildings in the city for fear that his memory of anything so perfect should

become dimmed and obscured by the numerous famous fanes, frescoes, fortresses, and fantastic fountains he would be forced to visit.

And as I have mentioned *fountains* the sojourner at the Seraphic City must on no account fail to visit the *Fonte Marcella*, one of the most picturesque objects in the city, surmounted by ancient emblematic stone carvings, and backed by the arched loggias, gay with flowering plants and creepers, of the lofty semi-ruinous brown-tiled houses which were once the residences of proud marauding barons, or the more peaceful churchman, or wealth-amassing merchant.

We briefly referred, in our first mention of Assisi to the great church in the plain, known as *S. Maria degli Angeli*, and built over the ancient romantic little chapel,

founded by S. Benedict in the sixth century, and afterwards used by S. Francis and his followers as a Haven of Rest, and a Holy Place for Contemplation and Prayer. In their huts around the Portiuncula the monks led their ascetic lives vowed to poverty and obedience, and when occasion required it, they travelled from town to town, and from village to village, preaching their Master's doctrines, and alleviating the woes of the infirm, and aged, and those struck down by the terrible epidemics that so often followed in the bloody footsteps of relentless and unnecessary wars. The traveller must on no account fail to visit the interesting sites contained in this 16th century church, which although imposing from its size and colossal cupola, has nothing to boast of in the way of architectural beauty. A considerable

portion of the nave was thrown down by a violent earthquake shock in 1832, and had to be rebuilt. The ancient and highly venerated little chapel of the Portiuncula occupies a central position in the church: and here services are held from time to time, much appreciated by the faithful.

Another quaint little chapel marks the spot where the Saint drew his last breath, and in an alcove above the altar of this tiny building is a beautiful statue of S. Francis by Andrea della Robbia. The expression on the worn ascetic face of the Saint is marvellously rendered; full of that sublime pathos and holy humility which we feel sure that the countenance of the extraordinary preacher and reformer must undoubtedly have worn.

Another grand Della Robbia in this church



The Fountain MARCELLA.

is in the chapel of S. Giuseppe, and represents the Coronation of the Virgin. On one side of the Madonna, S. Francis is represented receiving the Stigmata at La Verna; and on the other stands S. Jerome and his lion.

An exquisite predella in three compartments forms the lower part of this delightful altarpiece, the subjects being the Annunciation, the Holy Babe in the manger, and the Adoration of the Magi. In the sacristy of the church are one or two interesting pictures, the best of which is attributed to Perugino; and from thence we pass out by a shadowy arched colonnade to the famous Garden of the Roses, a spot much frequented by S. Francis, although it was then but a wild portion of forest land adjoining the Portiuncula. Beyond this is the chapel

of roses, which was built by S. Bonaventure over the cell occupied by S. Francis when he was at the Portiuncula. The choir frescoes were executed by Lo Spagna, but many of them are greatly injured; the figures of S. Elizabeth and S. Clare being in better preservation than the others. The frescoes in the nave are by Tiberio d'Assisi, but these are certainly not equal to those which adorn the Sanctuary.

The bad taste which has been displayed with such fatal decorative effect in this vast church of S. Maria degli Angeli comes with a severe shock to the sensitive mind. Even the delightful old-world chapel of the Portiuncula has not escaped from the vandalistic hands of the restorer, and its quiet simplicity is ruined by an ugly modern cupola erected at the western end of the roof,

and by some meaningless and atrocious gilded figures. One can only sigh and pass on, with a silent hope that a sense of artistic beauty may in the near future be kindled in the hearts of those responsible for these graceless acts of what one must really call desecration - desecration not of a lurid type of course, because the authors of it are perfectly unaware of how they have sinned against all those canons of good-taste and refinement which in the House of God should reign supreme.

There are many delightful drives in the neighbourhood of Assisi - none more full of interest and charm than that to the picturesque old-world town of Spello, four miles distant. The steep narrow tortuous streets, the embattled walls and gateways with their shattered pillars, and crumbling moss-grown

stones; and last, but not least, the beautiful frescoes of Pinturicchio - all combine to make this little mediæval sleepy town a veritable treasure-house of those interesting associations and far-away historical memories which appeal so strongly to the artist, the poet, and the antiquary. The three Pinturicchio frescoes in the church of S. Maria Maggiore are very beautiful, and have retained their colour in a marvellous manner. One represents the Virgin - a very gracious figure - entering the precincts of the Temple with anxious hurried footsteps, in search of the Child who had quitted her side with the inspired hope of commencing his ministry by disputing with the Doctors. Another fresco represents the March of the Magi, and is a very large composition alive with numerous horsemen, animals, and birds, rich

but harmonious in colouring, and very decorative in effect; some of the costumes, however, being strangely incongruous, many of the Magi being arrayed in mediæval Italian costumes, and carrying falcons upon their wrists; whilst their attendants, portrayed as men-at-arms, are seen galloping out of a wood in the background, the sunlight gleaming upon their helmets, breastplates, and formidable-looking spears and swords. The ancient tiles which form the flooring of this chapel are of extremely beautiful design and colouring, and harmonise well with the frescoed walls surrounding them. There is another very fine specimen of Pinturicchio's work in the South transept of the church of S. Andrea. This is a sumptuous altar-piece - painted on panel - of the Madonna and Child enthroned, supported

by S. John the Baptist, S. Andrew, S. Lawrence, S. Francis and S. Louis. S. Lawrence has a picture of his martyrdom portrayed upon his robe, and holds a gridiron in his hand. The quaint old church of S. Lorenzo - often over-looked by visitors - possesses a magnificent pulpit of carved oak, and a very fascinating set of antique stalls in *intarsia* work, in which the figures of Saints, and representations of sacred shrines and picturesque ecclesiastical buildings are inlaid with all the artistic beauty for which the mediæval workman was so deservedly famous.

The Roman remains at Spello are worthy of notice, the most remarkable being the Porta Consolare - by which one usually enters the city - which is adorned by the statues of an unknown Roman lady and two Consuls; and the very perfect and well pro-

portioned theatre, which is situated outside the walls, framed in by gnarled olive trees, clambering vines, and fig and mulberry trees. From the upper part of the town a very good view of this exquisite little theatre can be obtained, as also a fine prospect of distant Assisi, crowned with its dominant grey old fortress ; studded with soaring campanilis and domes, interspersed with time-worn palaces, convents, and embattled gateways ; and backed by the grey and purple peaks of the “ many-folded ” Apennines, which alone break the serenity of a clear and cloudless sky of sapphire blue.

It is a pleasant interlude in sight-seeing within a city's walls to take a drive in lovely spring or autumn weather through a romantic country, to such a place as Spello : and later on we shall speak of one or two

more expeditions of the same kind which may tempt the traveller a little farther afield, and to scenes of even greater interest.

The visitor to Assisi must spare time, if possible, to pay a visit to some of the less noted churches, one of which, S. Maria Maggiore, is built on the site of a Roman building of some importance, the pillars and mosaic pavement of which can be seen from the garden adjacent to the East end of the Church. It is believed, and with good reason, that S. Maria Maggiore was in very early ages the actual cathedral of Assisi. Indeed the rambling picturesque Bishop's palace lies as it were under the shelter of the square-built campanile, which in spite of its hoary antiquity, still stands sturdy and erect, glowing with the subdued colours of the far-famed Subasio stone. An ancient



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St. FRANCESCO (*Della Robbia*).

tradition which has been handed down for generations avers that S. Francis himself assisted in the rebuilding of the apse of the church, which in his day had begun to fall into decay. However that may be, it is certain that it was in the piazza outside that S. Francis solemnly renounced the world and all its pomps and vanities - much to the indignation of his enraged father Bernardone, and the sorrow of his other relatives, and friends. One of the frescoes in the upper church at S. Francesco (No. 5) records this strange but very eventful scene. In S. Bonaventure's *Legenda Santa Francisci* it is related how "the much vexed and perplexed Bernardone brought his disobedient son before the Bishop of Assisi in order that he should be made to renounce for ever all the paternal inheritance which he had in-

tended to bestow upon him. But Francis, as soon as he found himself in the Bishop's presence, that being a public place and many people present, did without a moment's delay, without waiting for his father's denunciation, nor even uttering a word in his own defence, did cast off all his clothes, and gave them back into his astonished parent's hands, with marvellous fervour thus addressing him: ' Until this hour I have called thee and submitted to thee as my father upon earth, but henceforth I may with confidence serve alone and pray to my Father who art in Heaven ' ". In this fresco Bishop Guido is seen wrapping his episcopal robe around the nude form of the young reformer, and it is evident from this act that he was not in sympathy with the irate father, but recognised with perhaps pro-

phetic vision that the frail young life dedicating itself to God's service in this strange and unusual manner possessed some latent supernatural power which would presently burst forth and proclaim itself with no uncertain voice to a wondering generation; shaking the whole of the Christian world to its foundations.

There is little now in the interior of S. Maria Maggiore to attract attention. A few faded frescoes, many of which were ruined in the devastating earthquake of 1832, still adorn the walls; these, and one or two antique stained-glass windows, and a little stone and wood carving, are all that remain to testify to the bygone splendour of the old metropolitan church. Near the Piazza Grande is the somewhat mean-looking domed church known as the Chiesa

Nuova, which was built early in the 17th century upon the actual site of the Casa Bernardone, where S. Francis was born. In the interior, which is dark and bare-looking, is shown the door - once part of the original house - through which Pica, Francis Bernardone's mother, was passing when she is said by tradition to have been accosted by an angel, who informed her that her son was to be born in a stable; and not far from this is the cell in which the rebellious Francis was for some time confined by his ill-tempered father, Messer Pietro.

In the lower part of the town, near the imposing Porta S. Pietro, stands the church of that name. It is brown and discoloured with age and exposure to the elements, and was probably built in the 15th century. The hoary old campanile, overshadowing many

brown-tiled roofs, buttresses, and crumbling stone carvings, has a quiet staid dignity of its own; and the ancient western doorway is embellished with a pair of quaint stone lions, and an archaic design of mingled sprays of plants and birds, which although somewhat primitive in the way of execution, is highly decorative in its general effect. The interior is well proportioned, but as in the case of so many Assisan churches, it is somewhat cold and disconsolate-looking, having doubtless been rifled of its artistic treasures in the old warlike days when the hill-cities were constantly waging war with each other, and much sacking and looting of conquered towns took place. There is, however, over the altar of this church, a painting by Matteo da Gualdo, representing the Madonna, and S.S. Peter

and Vittorino, attended by a choir of adoring angels.

The confraternities are very numerous in Assisi, and are a great feature in the life of the citizens. It is one of the most picturesque sights in the city to see the brethren clad in their quaint - almost outlandish - garments, attending the funeral of one of their departed members, carrying lighted candles in their hands on the way to the Campo Santo, and chanting mediæval dirges which have been in use for the same purpose for four or five centuries. Some of the chapels belonging to these confraternities are both interesting and beautiful; and the traveller must on no account fail to pay a visit to the *Chiesa dei Pellegrini* - in the *Via Principe di Napoli* - sometimes called the chapel of S. Anthony. This charming

little Oratory is adorned with beautiful frescoes, both on ceiling and walls, the work of two celebrated Umbrian artists, the Matteo da Gualdo we lately mentioned as having painted a picture for the church of S. Pietro; and Antonio da Foligno, generally known by the name of Mezzastris. This latter painter has covered one wall of the chapel with frescoes representing the miracles performed by S. Anthony. In one of these the Saint is seen sitting in the portico of a church in the company of some of his brother-hermits. These holy men, it appears, had run short of food, and in answer to the Saint's earnest prayers a number of camels are miraculously appearing upon the scene, blithely bearing upon their backs bales of provisions as refreshment for the inner man. There is a deli-

ciously quaint landscape of mountain, wood, and desert in this admirable picture. In a companion fresco, S. Anthony is seen seated under a resplendent colonnade, busily engaged in distributing the "Manna of the wilderness" to a number of beggars who no doubt were in the habit of receiving daily doles from the beneficent hands of the hermits. Mezzastris also painted the four figures which adorn the vaulted roof, and which represent S. Augustine, S. Bonaventure, S. Isidor, and Pope Leo III.

Matteo da Gualdo's work in this Oratory consists of a lovely enthroned Madonna over the altar, an Annunciation very tenderly treated, and two imposing but not very refined-looking figures of S. James and S. Anthony, on either side of whom are groups of graceful white-robed angels bearing in



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The Altar of terra cotta (*Della Robbia*).

their hands massive candelabra of mediæval design. A frieze of animated playful children, throwing into the air bunches of red and white roses, is painted with much charming realism by this talented Umbrian master, who also presents to us in an arched recess outside the door the two patrons of the chapel, S. Anthony and S. James of Campostello, surmounted by a frieze of diminutive angels playing upon musical instruments.

Visitors to Assisi who have not stayed at Perugia, which holds the proud position of capital of Umbria, will do well to pay that rival hill-city a visit, and I should recommend them to do so by carriage in preference to taking the train, for the drive is a very interesting and beautiful one, and the road, on reaching the base of the lofty

plateau upon which Perugia stands, passes the entrance to the celebrated Etruscan necropolis, known as the "Tombs of the Volumnii", a subterranean burying-place of marvellous interest, "haunted by the silent grandeur, and mystery of the dead". In a little booklet of this size it is impossible to give a description of such a city as Perugia. I merely mention it as being within a drive of Assisi, and shall now go on to briefly describe a few of those charming little Umbrian Towns which lie to the South and West of the Seraphic city, and should be visited if time is of no consequence - also by carriage, or motor-car.

We have already mentioned Spello. A few miles beyond that attractive little hill-town, but situated upon the rich and verdant Umbrian plain, lies a diminutive but histo-



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Interior of the Porziuncola.

rically-interesting city known as Foligno. It is well worth a visit, as its Pinacoteca and its churches contain some masterful frescoes and other paintings by the inspired hand of Niccolò Alunno, one of the earliest of the Umbrian Masters, and a disciple of Benozzo Gozzoli. Two of his finest pictures are in the church of S. Niccolò, one being a beautiful triptych the centre of which represents the Madonna and S. Joseph adoring the Holy Child, whilst at the sides are S. John the Baptist, S. Michael, S. Sebastian, S. Jerome, and others.

In the desecrated chapel of the Nunziata is an interesting and beautiful, but much injured fresco, the Baptism of our Lord, by that prince of Umbrian painters, Perugino.

Six miles from Foligno, on a lofty emi-

nence, 1500 feet above the sea, stands Montefalco, a place of pilgrimage for the artist who desires to study the early work of that marvellous fresco painter, Benozzo Gozzoli, to whom we have already alluded as Alunno's teacher. Those who have seen this master's incomparable frescoes in the chapel of the Riccardi palace at Florence, and his work at S. Gimignano, need not to be told what an eye for form and colour he possessed - what virile power combined with delicate and refined imagination. In the church of S. Francesco - now a picture gallery - will be found a series of fine frescoes, representing the life of S. Francis by this fascinating master of the brush. Many of the subjects are the same as those in the series by Giotto in the upper Church at Assisi, but the treatment is entirely diffe-

rent. The finest perhaps are the Saint preaching to the birds at Bevagna, the Pope's vision of Francis supporting the church, and the death of the Seraph at the Portiuncula. "This artist", says Vasari, "was the disciple of the deservedly-entitled angelic master, Fra Giovanni, by whom he was with reason much beloved. He was acknowledged by all who saw his works, to possess great power of invention, much facility, and richly varied resources in the delineation of animals, in perspective, in landscape, and in decorations".

Other eminent artists are also represented in this collection at S. Francesco. Near the W. door is a charming "Adoration of the Shepherds" by Perugino, and in the N. aisle is a remarkable picture by Melanzio, "The Madonna enthroned", and the same painter

executed some fine frescoes in the N. aisle which have suffered much from neglect and exposure. In this portion of the church is also some additional work by Benozzo Gozzoli, deplorably injured, but still revealing traces of the master-hand that designed and executed them.

The views from Montefalco are widespread, panoramic, permeated with the peculiar charm, the rich but harmonious colouring, of the glorious golden-green valley which lies at its feet, engirdled by the turquoise and amethyst mountains, on the slopes of which the purple shadows softly and lingeringly sweep along as the diaphanous cloud vapours are chased by the aërial currents from one lofty serrated peak to another. "The town stands on a hill in the very heart of Umbria", says Lina Duff Gor-

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PANORAMA of Spello.



don, " and hence it is called by the people the *ringhiera d' Umbria*.... Far below and around us stretched the landscape, the bed of the old Umbrian lake ; long green waves of blue and green, seething in the heated air of the May afternoon. -- The town felt very quiet and deserted. The grass grew everywhere through the stones of its piazza. In silence the children played, in silence the women sat at their doors, the place had fallen asleep".

Another highly interesting town, which can be reached from Assisi, either by rail or road, is Spoleto. Like Montefalco, it is only a few miles distant from Foligno. Spoleto is famous for its Roman remains, and its extremely picturesque situation, which so impressed the poet Shelley that he wrote the following description of it to his friend

Peacock: " We passed on day after day until we came to Spoleto, I think the most romantic city I ever saw. There is here an aqueduct of astonishing elevation, which unites two rocky mountains - there is the path of a torrent below, whitening the green dell with its broad and barren track of stones, and above there is a castle, apparently of great strength and of tremendous magnitude, which overhangs the city, and whose marble bastions are perpendicular with the precipice. I never saw a more impressive picture, in which the shapes of nature are of the grandest order, but over which the creations of man, sublime from their antiquity and greatness, seem to predominate. The castle was built by Belisarius, or Narses, I forget which; but was of that epoch ".

And before quitting the enchanted land

of Umbria, let us not forget, especially when we stand amid the shadows of the vast monastery church of Assisi, that the great world-poet, Dante, is supposed in the latter years of his harassed and mournful life, to have made his way into this part of Italy - seeking a haven of rest and peace where the enmity of his political foes could not reach him. In her "Makers of Florence" Mrs Oliphant wrote: "From Verona Dante strayed, it is supposed, into Umbria, to the Monastery of Fonte Avellana, in that lovely land of hills and woods which S. Francis had recently filled with associations and recollections. There is some floating gossamer-thread of tradition which says it was the poet who composed and invented the pictures with which his friend Giotto filled the great new sanctuary, dedicated in S. Fran-

cesco's honour. He is also reported to have passed some part of this uncertain time with a noble of Gubbio, Bosone dei Raffaelli; and again traditions of him are found in Udine, where the peasants still give the name of *Sedia di Dante* to a rock overlooking the river Tolmino. It was most probably when he was lingering upon those Umbrian hills, gazing wistfully where the horizon closed over Florence, that a last attempt was made to open a way for him back into his old home, but in such a way that it would have ill become the greatest of Florentines to tread ”.

The divine poet died at Ravenna not many years later in the 56th year of his age - “dying in Autumn with everything that is lovely, as he had been born with everything that was beautiful in May”.

Says Boccaccio : " There he rendered his weary spirit to God, not without great sorrow of all the citizens. - And there can be no doubt that he was received into the arms of his most noble Beatrice, with whom in the presence of him who is the chief good, leaving all miseries of the present life, they now most lightsomely live in that happiness to which there comes no end ".

Let our last lingering thoughts of the Seraphic City entwine themselves with beautiful thoughts around the memories of the holy S. Francis, and S. Clare ; and those supreme and immortal artists Dante, and Giotto.











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